

5-046

UK Traveller evictions could breach human rights, says UN

JAMIE SMYTH, Social Affairs Correspondent

Sat, Aug 06, 2011

PLANS BY a local council in England to evict up to 300 Irish Travellers living at one of Europe's biggest Traveller sites in Essex next month could institute "a grave breach of human rights", United Nations experts have said.

The UN experts on housing and minorities said yesterday they were "deeply concerned" about the planned evictions and asked the British government to intervene to try to find a negotiated and peaceful solution to the dispute.

The Travellers, many with connections to Rathkeale, Co Limerick, have lived at the Dale Farm camp outside Basildon in Essex for up to 10 years. Last month more than 60 families were issued with eviction orders following a long-running dispute with Basildon Council, which says they have no permission to live there.

The land was purchased by a Traveller in 2000, who then sold pitches to others. These were given planning permission, but the council insists the subsequent development – housing between 60 and 100 families – in caravans and mobile homes is on green-belt land.

The UN's special rapporteur on the right to housing, Raquel Rolnik, and its independent expert on minorities, Rita Izsak, yesterday issued a UN statement calling on the British authorities to intervene in the bitter 10-year dispute.

"Evictions constitute a grave breach of human rights if not carried out with full respect for international standards," said Ms Rolnik.

"We urge the UK authorities to halt the evictions process and to pursue negotiations with the residents until an acceptable agreement for relocation is reached in full conformity with international human rights obligations," she said.

The cost of the proposed evictions is estimated at £18 million (€21 million), including £10 million set aside to cover policing.

There are fears of large-scale disorder if the evictions go ahead, with radical groups and students planning to hold protests at the site when bulldozers move in.

Ms Izsak said the irony of the Dale Farm case was that the costs do not appear to include the provision of alternative accommodation for the evicted families.

Candy Sheridan, vice-chairwoman of the Gypsy Council in Britain and a relative of some of the Irish families at Dale farm, said the council had refused planning permission for several alternative sites for the residents.

"The political will to go ahead with these evictions is based on racism against the Traveller community," she said.

She added that many of the Traveller families were very vulnerable. "Many are widows, and there are 130 children at the site . . . Most of these children were born in Basildon and have lived all their lives at Dale farm," she said.

Council leader Cllr Tony Ball said in a statement yesterday the UN experts' claims are ill-founded. He added the council had made a provision of £1 million for temporary accommodation.

© 2011 The Irish Times